



Stewart Clegg - about Fatal Leadership Approaches

By Vibeke Vad Baunsgaard - March 11, 2017

Work related suicide is rarely studied. Professor Stewart Clegg – one of our most published and cited researchers on strategy and organizations – is one of the few, who has recently researched the matter. I catch him on his way through Lyon, France, to get his thoughts on fatal leadership approaches and an authoritarian leadership style in particular.

Fatal Leadership Approaches – Can Leadership Kill?

Can bad leadership kill? To most of us the question sounds extreme. The answer is: yes, bad leadership in our workplaces can kill the will to live.

It is one of those topics largely left in the dark. We don't talk so much about it, we don't research it much and it is rarely part of any public debate.

Every year, 800,000 people commit suicide. The [World Health Organization](#) estimates that for each death, there are about 20 attempted suicides. Therein each is estimated to have on average three or four family members, this equals the entire populations of Canada and Australia combined being affected by suicide or attempted suicide every year. Moreover, suicide is in fact the second leading cause of death among 15-29 year olds globally ([WHO](#)).

In relation to work, [Suicide Prevention Australia](#) estimates that about 17% of suicides in Australia are work-related. Furthermore, a [report](#) (Danish language link) that recently

caught my attention shows that 1,400 Danes die each year due to work-related stress caused by bad leadership. The area of work-related suicide still needs to be mapped, yet the numbers speak clearly of a need to look into the causes of work-related suicide.

How Fatal can a Leadership Approach Be?

Research tells us that an authoritarian leadership style has many negative consequences such as stress and demotivation, but how dangerous is it?

By *authoritarian leadership style* we here refer to a leadership style that is characterised by leaders having close control over employees, dictating procedures and activities, strictly enforcing rules, regulations and penalties and so forth.

I decide to pose the question to Professor Stewart Clegg from the University of Technology, Sydney. With co-authors Mícuil Pina e Cunha and Arménio Rego, he has researched suicide as a work and organizational phenomenon. Their research was published in *Business and Society Review* late 2016.

Using the seminal work of Emile Durkheim in his book: *Suicide* (1897), their article reflects on the suicidal waves at France Telecom Orange and at Foxconn, China. The story is one of solidarity or a lack thereof. While France Telecom suffered from bonds being broken during difficult transition processes, at Foxconn bonds had not been established to begin with and employees suffered from a lack of belonging.





What we learn and can apply to other organizations from this study is the major importance of the institutional nature of life in the organizations as well as the negative effects of an authoritarian leadership and management style.

Fatal Leadership Approaches

VIBEKE:

Stewart, we know that some leadership styles leave much to wish for, but how dangerous is an authoritarian leadership and management style?

STEWART CLEGG:

Extremely. Think of Trump and his leadership and management style – he popularized an authoritarian style on his TV Show – “You’re Fired” – and that helped to normalize the narcissistic authoritarianism he displayed on the campaign and has continued to display since becoming President.

The most dangerous aspect is the self-certainty and self-belief, the reluctance to admit that others may have something useful to offer from outside the bubble of self-importance and sycophancy. For authoritarian leaders the tendency is for communication, coordination and control to become overtaken by secrecy, self-centeredness, and sycophancy.

VIBEKE:

Many of us think of an authoritarian leadership style as belonging to another century. Why are so many leaders still embracing an authoritarian leadership style?

STEWART CLEGG:

Habit, predisposition, and socialization – especially in elite schools and universities. If you attend schools and universities that are quite clear about reproducing a ruling class then it should not be surprising how that sense of entitlement goes along with the education.

VIBEKE:

Your research shows to a disturbing degree how work can kill the will to live. To what extent are leaders responsible for this and how can leaders avoid this from happening?

STEWART CLEGG:

Leadership entails responsibilities; one is to provide interesting and meaningful work, work that captures the engagement of those doing it; when this is the case everyone is a winner.

Work that is repetitive, mind-numbing, dulling, dirty and dangerous – is better done by robots – the uniquely creative and intelligence attributes of people are what can make organizations great – leaders make organizations (and countries) great again by encouraging and learning from polyphony, from encouraging innovation and dissent in thinking rather than seeking to impose an orthodoxy.

Solidarity is at Play

Severe problems emerge when people find themselves in places and situations where they are stripped of their individuality and moreover their human bonds of solidarity, the authors explain.

At this 'intersection' employees become disconnected not only from each other, but also from collective meaning. This means in essence that employees become disconnected from shared beliefs and the way these act as a unifying force.

*“CREATING ORGANIZATIONS WHERE SOLIDARITY IS
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THEREFORE, A SOCIAL IMPERATIVE THAT SHOULD HAVE*

ATTRACTED THE ATTENTION OF BUSINESS ETHICISTS AND ORGANIZATIONAL SCHOLARS" (CLEGG, CUNHA & REGO 2016: 393)

How to Stay Clear of Fatal Leadership Approaches

In the understanding of suicide and misery as related to workplaces and leadership, the important question is how can we avoid these fatal situations?

Stewart Clegg gives the following words of advice in the [UTS Newsroom](#):

- Organizations should remember, they are not just workplaces, but also 'human communities'
- Managers should avoid destructive patterns of work, such as excessive pace that leads to unacceptable levels of stress
- Companies must also ensure their suppliers meet the highest standards of care for their workers
- At a higher level, government and regulators should examine, diagnose and discourage dangerous management practice not just because workers deserve protection, but also because of the implications for mounting health-care costs
- Identifying acceptable working conditions that should be applied globally also helps create a level playing field in trade
- Leaders should be trained to create psychologically safe environments
- Corporate statements should go beyond words to be reflected in reality. A Foxconn corporate social responsibility report used the word 'love' 13 times, yet showed little of it in practice

We need more Research about Suicide as a Work-Related Matter

I commend the authors on taking up this highly under-researched area of *suicide as a work and organizational phenomenon*. It is unfortunately an area of social research proving itself to be more and more relevant, hence also one we cannot allow to be ignored.

It is critical that research not only focus on stories of success, large corporations and popular topics. Just as important is research of barriers, taboos and those topics that never reach the evening news.

Clegg, Cunha and Rego express this in the following way in their article:

"The recent interest in compassionate organizing (Dutton et al. 2014; Simpson et al. 2013) should not lead us to ignore those cases marked by a lack of compassion, solidarity, and rich forms of intersubjective relationality as organizational outcomes. On the contrary, we should see compassionate organizing as an effective antidote against toxicity in workplaces, for the sake of the greater good. There is little more toxic than the voluntary extinguishment of life by young people" (2016).

Please leave your comments and thoughts below. If you know about interesting research results on the matter, please leave a note about these, and I will incorporate them in a list of further readings.

References

Clegg, Stewart, Miguel Pina e Cunha and Arménio Rego (2016): Explaining Suicide in Organizations: Durkheim Revisited. *Business and Society Review*, Vol. 121. No. 3: 391-414.



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